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WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY COMPETENCE?:
A COMPARISON OF PERCEIVED COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE
AMONG NORTH AMERICANS AND CHINESE

By

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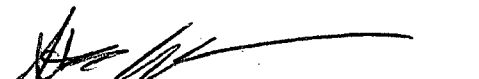
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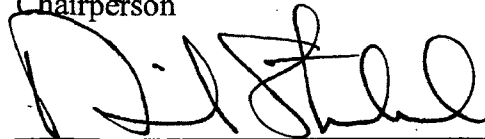
Department of Communication Studies

December 2005

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What Do You Mean by Competence?: A Comparison of Perceived Communication Competence among North Americans and Chinese

Chairperson: Dr. Steve Yoshimura 

The purpose of this study was to investigate if and how North Americans and Chinese differ in their perceptions of communication competence. The literature suggested that these two cultural groups have different communication styles, indicating different perceptions of communication competence. A questionnaire was administered to 112 North American in the U.S. and 101 Chinese in Mainland China. Participants were asked to evaluate the effectiveness, appropriateness, and their personal preference of items describing (un)assertive or (in)expressive behaviors. The results revealed that, when compared to Chinese, North Americans perceived assertiveness as significantly more effective, appropriate, and likable. No significant differences were found in their evaluation of expressive behaviors. In addition, the results indicated that their perceptions of assertiveness were not as discrepant as predicted. Discussion focuses on the implications of the results for communication competence research and intercultural interaction training.

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I also would like to thank my family members, friends, and the faculty for facilitating me to collect data and encouraging me throughout the research. Thanks to Tornabene family, my host family, for their continuous care and help.

I arrived in this lovely town as a foreign student, without knowing if Safeway was the name of an insurance company or a grocery store. Here, I met with the smartest professors and students, joined the discussion of forefront scientific research, learned about this country, and got married! Thank you all, for making the two years in Missoula the most exciting, stimulating, enjoyable, and rewarding experience in my life.

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It is the first time Rich goes to the home of his Chinese girlfriend for dinner. When his future mother-in-law serves the main course, she says, "This is not salty enough. No flavor." Rich answers, "All it needs is soy sauce." He pours the sauce into the dish. All the Chinese at the table are astonished. However, not until after the dinner, does Rich know that he did something inappropriate. He does not know that when Chinese people understate their work, they are actually showing their modesty.

This excerpt from the movie, *Joy Luck Club*, is an example of incompetent communication behavior in interpersonal interaction between North Americans and Chinese. Since the 1820s, when the Chinese began to immigrate to the United States, a constant increase of interaction between North Americans and Chinese has evolved. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, of the 11.9 million people who identified themselves as Asian, over 20 percent were Chinese, comprising the largest Asian group in the United States. Besides immigration, globalization brought an increasing amount of business, academic, and cultural interaction between North Americans and Chinese. Hence, North Americans currently encounter Chinese people and culture in many places: international businesses, colleges, or even in their own neighborhoods.

Research indicates that communication difficulties arise when people from different cultures encounter one another (Diggs & Clark, 2002; Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989; Martin, Hecht, & Larkey, 1994). To address the communication difficulties, researchers examine communication competence. Communication competence refers to "the extent to which objectives functionally related to communication are fulfilled through cooperative interaction appropriate to the interpersonal context" (Spitzberg &

Cupach, 1984, p.100). A great deal of research has been conducted on communication competence between people of the same cultural group (e.g. Canary & Spitzberg, 1987, 1989, 1990; Rubin, Martin, Bruning, & Powers, 1993; Spitzberg, 1994; Westmyer, DiCioccio, & Rubin, 1998). To improve communication and understanding between members of different cultural groups, researchers have also compared similarities and differences of communication competence among different cultural groups. Much previous intercultural competence research compares communication competence of African-Americans and European-Americans (e.g. Collier, 1988; Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989; Martin, Hecht, & Larkey, 1994). Some studies have focused on comparing North Americans and Japanese (e.g. Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001; Miyahara, 1998). As the largest Asian group in the United States, Chinese have received little attention in competence research specifically, and in communication research generally. In a study comparing the differences in self-disclosure between Chinese and Americans, Rubin, Yang, and Porte (2000) suggest that certain Chinese patterns of communication can be unique due to Confucian influences, yet are widely overlooked in communication research.

Accordingly, the present research undertakes a comparison of perceptions of communication competence among North Americans and Chinese. The question I am interested in answering is: are there differences between North Americans and Chinese in their perceptions of communication competence? This study will have both practical and theoretical value. Practically, this study can provide information of how North Americans and Chinese perceive communication competence differently, so as to help practitioners

develop cross-cultural training programs in colleges and international businesses. Theoretically, this study will examine the applicability of competence theories as developed in previous research on the Chinese cultural group. By doing so, the results of this study will help develop a general cultural model of competence.

In the rest of the paper, I will first review the literature on interpersonal communication competence, intercultural communication competence, Chinese communication behaviors, and Chinese's perception of communication competence. Then, hypotheses and method will be presented, followed by the results and implications.

Literature Review

Interpersonal Communication Competence (IPC)

Competence generally helps humans control their environment and specifically helps them achieve personal and interpersonal objectives (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Due to its important role in our social lives, competence has received a great deal of attention in interpersonal communication research. In an extensive review of previous research on competence, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) identified two main approaches to conceptualizing competence: outcome focused and message focused. The outcome-focused approach, which includes the study of fundamental competence, social competence and interpersonal competence, emphasizes the effective achievement of outcomes. The message-focused approach, which includes linguistic competence and communicative competence, focuses on the appropriateness of behaviors.

As a hybrid approach, relational competence emphasizes both communication behaviors and outcomes, conceptualized as being a function of perceived appropriateness

and effectiveness (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Appropriateness involves behaviors that are appropriate to the situational and relational context. Effectiveness refers to the achievement of the interactant's goals, objectives, or intended functions. Appropriateness and effectiveness are two distinct yet mutually desirable dimensions of competence. For instance, it is possible that an interactant acted appropriately without achieving his/her personal goal, or an interactant successfully met his/her objectives with inappropriate behaviors. The interactants in both cases are deemed as less competent than one who achieved his/her goal with appropriate communicative behaviors. Thus, the most ideal communication maximizes both appropriateness and effectiveness. The more appropriate and effective a person's behaviors are perceived to be, the more competent he or she is likely to be (Canary & Spitzberg, 1989).

Conceptualizing competence as perceived appropriateness and effectiveness, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) suggest that competence is not viewed as something intrinsic in the behavior itself, but as a perception of the interactants (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Spitzberg, 1994). The question to ask is not what behavior is consistently competent, but what behaviors are perceived as appropriate and effective by the interactants in the given context. Based on the assumption of competence as a function of perceived appropriateness and effectiveness, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) organized previous IPC theory and research into a model of relational competence. The model has five components: motivation, knowledge, skill, outcome, and context.

Motivation, knowledge, and skill are the essential components of the model. To be competent, individuals need to have the desire to engage in the communication at the

first place. Having the motivation to communicate, individuals also need to know what to communicate. That is, communicators must be knowledgeable about the context, the other, and the subject of the specific communication episode. Knowing what to communicate, individuals need to know how to communicate, that is, they need to have the skill to communicate. Spitzberg (2002) defined the skill component as repeatable goal-directed behaviors, behavioral patterns, and sequences that are appropriate to the context. Skilled behavior, along with motivation and knowledge, enables the interactant to obtain desired outcomes.

A variety of outcomes can be referenced as indicators of competence. One of the most conceptually developed outcomes in IPC research is communication satisfaction. Defined as the favorable affective response to the fulfillment of expectations, communication satisfaction is proven to be a generalizable outcome of competent interaction (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) and is widely adopted in competence research (e.g., Duran, 1992; Rubin, Martin, Bruning, & Powers, 1993; Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984). Besides communication satisfaction, interpersonal attraction is also widely utilized in IPC research as the outcome of competent interaction (e.g., Canary & Spitzberg, 1987; Cupach & Spitzberg, 1983). Other outcomes identified are perceived confirmation, feeling good, and relational trust.

In addition to motivation, knowledge, skill, and outcomes, context is also integrated into the inference of competence (Spitzberg, 1991; Spitzberg & Brunner, 1991; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Spitzberg and Brunner (1991) suggest that competence is contingent upon the social context in which the communication occurs. According to

Spitzberg et al. (1991), social context is organized according to culture, type, relationship, and function. *Culture* refers to the rules and norms as a function of race, nationality, or ethnic identification. *Type* refers to the typologies of setting and social context (e.g. in a bar, in a church, formal context, informal context). *Relationship* refers to the nature of relationship (e.g. friends, intimate, etc.). *Function* contains the goals and objectives to be accomplished in a specific episode (e.g. to persuade, to obtain communication satisfaction, etc).

The model of relational competence synthesizes different perspectives in competence research and provides a conceptually integrated model in research on interpersonal communication competence. It also departs from the traditional observable ratings of competence behaviors to interactants' perceptions of communication competence. The model is widely adopted and tested in IPC research (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987, 1989, 1990; Rubin, Martin, Bruning, & Powers, 1993; Spitzberg, 1994; Westmyer, DiCioccio, & Rubin, 1998).

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)

As in interpersonal communication, competence has drawn much attention in research on intercultural communication. Researchers have examined competence in intercultural adaptation (Ruben, 1976), the effects of workshops in improving intercultural competence (Hammer, 1984), and the role of competence in international business relationship development (Griffith, 2002).

Much of the ICC research focused on examining the behavioral skills that facilitate effective communication in intercultural interaction. In one of the most

influential works of the behavioral approach, Ruben (1976) identified seven behavioral dimensions of intercultural communication competence: (1) display of respect--the ability to express respect for the other person; (2) interaction posture--the ability to respond to others in a nonevaluative way; (3) orientation to knowledge--admitting that people may have different knowledge and perceptions; (4) empathy --the ability to think and feel from the other person's perspective; (5) self-oriented role behavior—the ability to be flexible and effective with one's individual role in a group; (6) interaction management—the ability to manage the interaction (e.g. taking turns in discussion); and (7) tolerance for ambiguity--the ability to react to new situations and environment with little visible discomforts. Ruben (1976) developed an ICC behavioral assessment scale in which each of the seven dimensions of behavior can be measured. Koester and Olebe (1988) argue that Ruben (1976)'s scale was limited by complex language and a lack of overall assessment of competence. Thus, Koester and Olebe (1988) modified Ruben's original scale into a Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Communication (BASIC). The BASIC provides an overall score measuring intercultural competence and enables nonprofessionals to do the rating. The BASIC is recommended in one communication textbook (e.g. Lustig & Koester, 2003) as a tool to assist improving intercultural communication competence. In this textbook, Lustig and Koester (2003) described each of the BASIC's behavioral categories in detail and attributed it as a "guide to the very basics of intercultural competence" (Lustig & Koester, 2003).

Previous ICC research, including the above mentioned influential behavioral categories suggested by Ruben (1976) and developed by Koester and Olebe (1988), has

been criticized for a lack of solid conceptual direction and measurement validation (Martin, 1993; Spitzberg, 1989). For example, Spitzberg (1989) pointed out that the widely adopted behavioral categories of Ruben (1976) originated from the author's conceptions rather than empirical data. Moreover, the behavioral categories were only measured with very small samples after they were developed. Spitzberg (1989) also suggested that the progress of ICC should derive from IPC theories that can apply to intercultural contexts.

Whereas ICC research is criticized for a lack of conceptual direction, intercultural researchers question the generality of IPC research. It is argued that, based on research conducted in the specific community of the United States, with typically middle-class, college educated Euro-American sample, IPC research may contain a "Western perspective" and be limited in generalizability to other cultures (Martin, 1993; Miyahara, 1998; Yum, 1988). In a review of the research on both IPC and ICC, Martin (1993) summarizes the debate:

Researchers investigating interpersonal competence wrestled with the definition and measurement of communication competence, but with little exception largely ignored the cultural constraints of their findings. In contrast, researchers in intercultural communication explored cultural variations in competence, but focused only tangentially on communication behaviors and often ignored the conceptual questions addressed by interpersonal communication research (p. 16).

Martin (1993) advocated that theoretical and empirical research efforts work toward developing a culture-general model applicable to both intra- and intercultural interactions. According to Martin (1993), the culture-general model should integrate conceptualizations of previous IPC research, as well as attend to the conceptualization of competence among different cultural groups. The problem is that research to date does

not provide enough information about the universality of competence. Martin (1993) suggests that before we can develop the culture-general model, we need to know more about the conceptualizations of competence among other cultural groups. Much of the current research works toward this end.

As one of the studies in this line, Collier (1988) compared how Mexican Americans, Black Americans, and White Americans view appropriate communication behaviors differently. The respondents were asked to recall a recent conversation with an acquaintance and describe in a questionnaire the other person's appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Research results suggest that, relatively speaking, Mexican Americans emphasized relational climate, Black Americans emphasized individuality in politeness and expression, whereas White Americans emphasized verbal content (Collier, 1988).

Hecht, Ribeau, and Alberts (1989) conducted four studies examining Afro-Americans' perception of satisfying interethnic communication. Through questionnaires and interviews, Afro-Americans were asked to describe their satisfying and dissatisfying conversations with whites. They were also asked to provide conversational improvement strategies they believe are effective in improving the conversation. The results of the four studies (Hecht et al., 1989) showed that Afro-Americans adopt a "spontaneous and verbally aggressive" (p. 405) communication style and present a high level of involvement in topics, contestations, and partners. To improve the conversation with Afro-Americans, the other person needs to be assertive about the topic, be open-minded, and regulate the conversation smoothly.

In a study investigating competent behaviors as perceived by Hispanics and Non-Hispanics in different contexts, Martin, Hammer, and Bradford (1994) asked respondents to imagine themselves in a specific context (intercultural vs. intracultural; social vs. task). The respondents were then asked to rate the importance of specific behaviors in creating an impression of competence in the given contexts. It was found that assertive behaviors (using impressive words, talking a lot, and agreeing with the other) are more important for Hispanic respondents than for non-Hispanic respondents across different contexts. The researchers suggest that a cultural tradition valuing verbal fluency among Hispanics might account for this difference.

The above-mentioned research suggests that different cultural groups may perceive competence differently by emphasizing certain communication behaviors or patterns. Do Chinese and Americans perceive competence differently?

Chinese Communication Behaviors

To understand the communication behaviors of a culture group, one needs to first look at the cultural tradition and value system in which the communication behaviors are found. Chinese culture is greatly influenced by three philosophical traditions of thought, namely Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Of the three thoughts, Confucianism, which emerged as early as 2,500 years ago, is the most dominant one (Gao, 1998; Lustig & Koester, 2003; Yum, 1988). Confucianism advocates maintaining proper human relationships, as well as undertaking social and ethical responsibilities. As a result, the Chinese emphasizes harmony in relationships and the importance of meeting others' needs, wishes, and expectations.

Cultural tradition influences communication behaviors embedded in it.

Researchers suggest that, influenced by Confucianism, some of the Chinese interpersonal relationship patterns or communication behaviors should be different from that of North Americans. Yum (1988) pointed out that five general characteristics are salient in interpersonal relationships among East Asians (including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean):

1) Particularistic (i.e., different rules and norms apply in different relationships and contexts), 2) Long-term and asymmetrical reciprocity (i.e., people perceive relationships as long-term ones without calculating what he/she gives and receives), 3) Sharp distinction between ingroup and outgroup members (i.e., people identify with small groups over a long period of time and treat ingroup and outgroup members differently), 4) Informal intermediaries (i.e., intermediaries are necessary in establishing new relationships. The intermediaries are usually personally known and can be used in a variety of relationships), 5) Overlap of personal relationships and public relationships (i.e., to establish a good public relationship, such as business relationship; one needs to first establish a warm personal relationship).

Compared to Yum's (1988) analysis as a sketch of Chinese interpersonal relationships, Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) portray the picture at a more specific level. Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) argue that under the influence of Confucianism, the conception of self in Chinese is not a complete one. The Chinese self is other-oriented and needs to be fulfilled by others. The other-oriented self can be reflected in some specific behaviors that are quite different from North Americans. According to Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998), the Chinese cherish humility, modesty, and self-effacing talk; they

tend to use indirect talking when making a comment or request; they often appear hesitant instead of assertive; and they don't like verbally articulate and talkative persons. The other-oriented self of the Chinese also affects how they draw the line between private versus public information. For the Chinese, asking questions on marital status, occupation, health situation, income, and place of residence, as well as offering advice are considered a sign of concern for the other person (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). For North Americans however, these questions can be highly private.

Some of the above mentioned Chinese communication patterns and behaviors have been empirically examined. In one such study, Gao (2001) compared intimacy, passion, and commitment in Chinese and American romantic relationships. Based on the analysis of cultural traditions, the researcher predicted that compared with Americans, Chinese would have a lower level of passion and intimacy, and higher level of commitment in their romantic relationships. The research results showed that Chinese respondents had a lower level of passion than American respondents. However, the amount of intimacy and commitment did not vary between the two cultural groups. Similarly, Rubin, Yang, and Porte (2000) predicted that Chinese respondents would report less self-disclosure than North American respondents, based on analysis of cultural patterns. Yet no significant differences emerged in the data. Chinese and North American respondents reported similar levels of disclosure with a similar hierarchy of target interlocutors (lowest level of disclosure with strangers and highest with intimate others) and on conversational subjects (lowest level of disclosure on money and highest on tastes).

Chinese are also described as adopting relatively inexplicit communication patterns

(Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998) and applying different rules and norms in different relationships (Yum, 1988). Relevant to these descriptions, Ma (1990) compared how explicitly Chinese and North Americans responded to the communicators who made them feel discontent (displeased or uncomfortable). The researcher predicted that Chinese respondents would express less discontent overall and would differentiate their response in different relationships. Contrary to the researcher's prediction, it was found that Americans and Chinese respondents were not significantly different in the levels of expressed discontent. Moreover, Chinese did not differentiate their responses to different relationships with the communicators.

Do these studies suggest that cultural traditions no longer play an important role in the communication of the Chinese and that Chinese people communicate in the same way as do North Americans? Such a conclusion is hasty, evidenced by a few studies that supported the influences of traditional culture. Ma (1992) examined the role of unofficial intermediaries in interpersonal conflicts in China. After interviewing 25 Chinese living in China, the researcher found that using unofficial intermediaries to resolve conflicts is still pervasive in China. Usually an ingroup member (mutual friend, elderly people respected by both parties) serves as the intermediary. This study supported Yum's (1988) suggestion that informal intermediaries are widely utilized in Chinese interpersonal relationships.

Zhang, Harwood, and Hummert (2004) argued that different generations might display different patterns. Zhang et al. (2004) compared how older and younger Chinese evaluated four conflict management styles (competing, avoiding, accommodating, and

problem-solving). In the West, problem-solving style is the most appropriate and effective one. In this study, it was found that older Chinese participants favored an accommodating style, whereas younger Chinese participants either favored a problem-solving style or judged the problem-solving style as equally positive to an accommodation style. This study suggested that different generations of the Chinese might have different perceptions on the same communication behaviors.

Previous research on Chinese communication behaviors suggests that the picture of Chinese communication patterns and behaviors may be much more complicated than one can draw from either Chinese cultural traditions or from Western communication theories. More empirical research is needed to better understand concurrent Chinese communication, in which the communicator's actual behaviors and perceptions are examined, and the factors of age and cultural experiences attended to.

Perception of Communication Competence among the Chinese

A few studies found in the literature directly compared perceptions of competence among North Americans and Chinese. Zhong (1998) asked 150 Americans and 74 Chinese to rate 20 behavior items as competent or not. The researcher did not find significant differences between Chinese and American participants' perceptions of competence. In an earlier study, Hwang, Chase, and Kelly (1980) asked a Chinese sample to evaluate competent behaviors identified in previous IPC research. Similarly to Zhong's (1989) study, no significant differences were found.

One might argue that Zhong (1989) and Hwang et al. (1988) failed to find any differences between the two cultural groups because the communication patterns unique

to the Chinese were not attended to. Bond, Leung, and Wan (1982) attended to this matter. Bond et al. (1982) compared how the Chinese and North Americans rated self-effacing talk and self-enhancing talk. Valuing self-effacing talk is believed to be a distinct pattern that differentiates Chinese's communication from that of North Americans (Gao, 1998; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). In Bond et al.'s (1982) empirical test, it was found that, similar to North Americans, Chinese rated self-enhancing talk as more competent than self-effacing talk. However, contrary to North Americans, the Chinese respondents liked the self-effacing person more than the self-enhancing one.

In the above studies, the researchers did not state how communication competence was defined for the respondents. However, their research raises two questions worth pondering before we go further to test other patterns and behaviors: 1) Does communication competence as conceptualized by Western scholars mean the same thing for the Chinese? 2) Is communication competence as important for the Chinese as it is for North Americans in their interpersonal relationships?

An examination of the literal meaning of *communication competence* in Chinese language may provide some implication for answering these questions. Interestingly, there is no precise corresponding translation of either *communication* or *competence* in the Chinese language. *Communication* is usually translated as *Chuan bo*, which means spreading, or mass media. Gao (1998) suggests that the Chinese translation closest to *communication* should be *Gou tong*. *Gou tong* means to connect with other people verbally and nonverbally. Similarly, there is no single Chinese word that precisely translates *competence*. IPC scholars define competence as "the extent to which objectives

functionally related to communication are fulfilled through cooperative interaction appropriate to the interpersonal context” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, p.100). The direct translation of *competence* into Chinese is *Jin zhengli*, which suggests winning by defeating others. This translation does not contain the meaning of *appropriateness* at all. Based on the meaning of *competence* as defined by IPC scholars, two Chinese words are necessary to convey the meaning of *competence*. The two words are *Deti* (appropriateness) and *You xiao* (effectiveness). Thus linguistically, the Chinese treat competence separately as effectiveness and appropriateness.

The unmatched translation suggests that, if not clearly defined for the Chinese respondents, *competence* might be taken as *effectiveness* instead of *effectiveness* and *appropriateness*. In Zhong’s (1998) study, the Chinese respondents were asked to rate “what is important...to be perceived as competent” (Zhong, 1998, p.179). In Hwang, Chase, and Kelly’s (1980) study, competence is operationalized as “importance to effective interpersonal communication” (Hwang, Chase, & Kelly, 1980, p. 72). The results of these studies suggest that Chinese and North Americans seem to rate effectiveness similarly. However, it is not clear if they rate appropriateness similarly.

In IPC research, effectiveness means the achievement of the interactant’s goals, objectives, or intended functions. Appropriateness means adherence to rules and norms. Effectiveness and appropriateness jointly serve as important references of competence. Among the Chinese however, effectiveness and appropriateness are not combined in language, and possibly, not combined in perceptions. Research on Chinese communication behaviors, which was discussed earlier, suggests that traditional values

and Western ideas may jointly affect the Chinese's communication behaviors and perceptions. On the one hand, the influence of globalization may make Chinese think similarly with North Americans regarding how to achieve personal goals. On the other hand, the Chinese cultural traditions may set different criteria of what is deemed as appropriate. Hence, to understand how North Americans and Chinese perceive communication competence, it is important to examine how the two cultural groups perceive the effectiveness and appropriateness of communication behaviors differently. Moreover, it is possible that the differences between these two cultural groups reside more in appropriateness and less in effectiveness.

To test how North Americans and Chinese may perceive appropriateness and effectiveness differently, perceptions of two specific skills, assertiveness and expressiveness, will be examined in the present study. These two skills are selected because a) they are identified as important interpersonal skills in IPC research; and b) based on previous analysis of Chinese traditional culture, they are valued differently by the Chinese.

Assertiveness is defined as "the skill to seek, maintain, or enhance reinforcement in an interpersonal situation through an expression of feelings or wants when such expression risks loss of reinforcement or even punishment" (as cited by Lorr & More, 1980). It was mentioned in the previous section that the Chinese cherish humility and modesty. Speaking definitely and forcefully is deemed as a mark of arrogance and inconsideration (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). North Americans, however, prize assertiveness. Assertiveness is identified as one of the important interpersonal skills in

competence research (Rubin, Martin, Bruning, & Powers, 1993; Spitzberg, 1994; Spitzberg, 2004). Combining these considerations, it is expected that:

Hypothesis 1a: By comparison to North Americans, Chinese will rate assertiveness as similarly effective.

Hypothesis 1b: By comparing to North Americans, Chinese will rate assertiveness as less appropriate.

Expressiveness is another important skill identified in previous IPC research (Rubin, Martin, Bruning, & Powers, 1993; Spitzberg & Hurt, 1987; Spitzberg, 2004). North Americans are encouraged to present and discuss their opinions and feelings openly. Chinese, however, do not advocate expressiveness as much as North Americans do. According to Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998), due to the concern for harmony, unity, and hierarchy, Chinese often are reminded to be discreet in their everyday speech. Hence, the following hypotheses are presented:

Hypothesis 2a: By comparison to North Americans, Chinese will rate expressiveness as similarly effective.

Hypothesis 2b: By comparison to North Americans, Chinese will rate expressiveness as less appropriate.

In Bond, Leung, and Wan's (1982) study, Chinese respondents liked the self-effacing person better, even though the same person was deemed as less competent. Does this suggest that the Chinese do not like competent people as much as North Americans do? In IPC research, competence is referenced by effectiveness and appropriateness. Effectiveness means the achievement of the interactant's goals,

objectives, or intended functions. Among the Chinese however, communication is primarily utilized to maintain peaceful relationships instead of achieving personal goals (Gao, 1998). Yum (1988) also argued that for East Asians, including Chinese, maintaining proper relationships is more important than getting things done. Thus, it is expected that:

Hypothesis 3a: There will be a weaker association between perceived effectiveness of a person's behavior and liking for that person among Chinese than among North Americans.

Hypothesis 3b: There will be a stronger association between perceived appropriateness of a person's behavior and liking for that person among Chinese than among North Americans.

Method

The goal of this study was to compare how North Americans and Chinese perceive appropriateness and effectiveness, especially in regard to assertiveness and expressiveness. To meet these objectives, questionnaires were distributed to North Americans and Chinese.

Participants

North American participants were recruited in lower level Communication courses at the University of Montana. Chinese participants were recruited by the local faculty of a southwestern university in the People's Republic of China. A total of 229 undergraduate students volunteered to participate in this study during normal class hours. Six questionnaires were eliminated due to gross incompleteness, five were eliminated due to

obvious response patterns, and another five were eliminated because the respondents identified themselves as neither North American nor Chinese. Of the remaining 213 cases, 112 were North Americans and 101 were Chinese.

In the North American sample, there were 57 males and 55 females. The average age was 21.51 ($SD = 5.20$). In the Chinese sample, there were 37 males and 64 females. The average age was 20.05 ($SD = 1.24$). The demographics of the samples are showed in Table 1.

TABLE 1.
Demographics of the Samples

	<i>N</i>	Age	Male	Female
North American	112	21.51 (5.20)	57	55
Chinese	101	20.05 (1.24)	37	64

Note: Age is showed as means with standard deviations in parentheses.

Instruments

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part contained demographic questions. Respondents were asked to report their age, gender, and racial/ethnic background.

In the second part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to evaluate communication behavioral items on assertiveness and expressiveness. Previous IPC research (Spitzberg, 1991; Spitzberg & Brunner, 1991; and Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984)

and ICC research (Martin, Hammer, & Bradford, 1994) suggest that people's perception of competence may be influenced by context. The competency of the same communication behavior may be evaluated differently in differently contexts. Hence, a written description was provided at the beginning of this part to specify the context in which the communication behaviors were evaluated.

Two previously developed instruments, respectively on assertiveness and expressiveness, were adopted in this part of the survey. Items on assertiveness were adopted from Lorr and More's (1980) Assertiveness Scale. The Assertiveness Scale contains 32 items. The wording of the original scale was slightly changed to allow a third party to evaluate each behavior and to fit the context described in the present study. Two highly contextual-sensitive items were deleted. Items on expressiveness were adopted from Macklin and Rossiter's (1976) Interpersonal Communication Report. This measure contains three dimensions of interpersonal communication (expressiveness, self-disclosure, and self-actualization). Only items on expressiveness were adopted in the present study.

Combining these two measures, the instrument in present study contained 35 behavioral items describing (un)assertive or (in)expressive behaviors. Respondents were asked to evaluate these items, respectively, on three criteria (effectiveness, appropriateness, and their own preferences) on five-point likert scales ranging from 1 (ineffective) to 5 (effective), 1 (inappropriate) to 5 (appropriate), and 1 (not like at all) to 5 (like very much). Appropriateness and effectiveness were defined for the respondents, according to Spitzberg (1994), respectively as "in accordance with rules, expectancies, or

norms” and “accomplishing of relatively desirable outcomes.” Specific information about the relational and situational context, as well as the desirable outcomes, was provided in the context description at the beginning of this part of the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to keep this information in mind when evaluating the items. Alpha reliability for the assertiveness measure was high ($\alpha = .74$ for effectiveness, $\alpha = .80$ for appropriateness, and $\alpha = .79$ for liking). Alpha reliability for the expressiveness measure was $\alpha = .47$ for effectiveness, $\alpha = .42$ for appropriateness, and $\alpha = .52$ for liking.

As a manipulation check, the third part of the questionnaire contained four items to measure the realism of the context description and the behavioral items. Respondents were asked to rate on a five-point likert scales ranging from 1 (not agree) to 5 (strongly agree) of whether behaviors described in this questionnaire seemed real, happened around them in the past, was possible, and would likely to happen in the future. Both North American participants ($N = 112$, $M = 4.26$, $SD = .50$) and Chinese participants ($N = 101$, $M = 4.26$, $SD = .66$) perceived the context and items as very real.

Since half of the participants in this study were Chinese, language factors had been taken into consideration. To avoid inaccurate interpretation of the questions written in English due to respondents’ different levels of English language ability, questionnaires in two languages were used in this study, one in Chinese for the Chinese participants and one in English for the North American participants. To ensure accuracy of translation, the back translation method was used. The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into Chinese by the researcher. A second person translated the questionnaire back into English to test the accuracy of the translation. The original translation was

proved to be accurate and only slight adjustment was made after the back translation check.

Procedures

Participants were solicited in class to fill out questionnaires about their perceptions of specific communication behaviors. The survey was anonymous. The researcher administered most of the surveys in the United States. Local faculty members administered the surveys in China. For those surveys that had to be administered by person other than the researcher, specific instructions were provided to ensure the exact procedures described below were followed during the administration of the survey.

Before distributing the questionnaires, the researcher/faculty explained to the students the main content and purpose of this study, as well as the approximate time needed to complete the questionnaire. The students then were asked if they wanted to participate in this study. Those who chose to participate were provided cover letters and questionnaires. The cover letter provided information about the purpose of this study, how the results would be used and possible benefits and risks the participants might experience throughout the course of his/her participation. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaires in the classroom and to drop completed questionnaires in a box near the door. Submission of the completed questionnaire indicated participant consent.

After submitting the questionnaire, participants were thanked and informed that they could leave their contact information on a separate sheet of paper if they want to receive the results of the study. Information on this sheet of paper was kept confidential

and placed separately from the completed questionnaires throughout the study.

Results

The perceived effectiveness and appropriateness of assertiveness

The first set of hypotheses predicted that by comparison to North Americans, Chinese would rate assertiveness as similarly effective and less appropriate. To test these predictions, *t*-test scores of the two cultural groups were compared. The predictions were partially supported. The result of *t*-test indicated a significant difference between the two cultural groups of their ratings of both the effectiveness ($t [212] = 7.29, p < .001$) and the appropriateness ($t [213] = 8.54, p < .001$) of assertive behaviors. More specifically, North Americans ($M = 3.74$) did perceive the assertive behaviors as more appropriate than did Chinese ($M = 3.33$). However, North Americans ($M = 3.95$) also perceived the assertive behaviors as more effective than did Chinese ($M = 3.52$). The results are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2.

Means, Standard Deviation, and *t*-scores of Perceived Effectiveness and Appropriateness of Assertive Behaviors

	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	North		Chinese	
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Effectiveness	7.29	< .001	3.95	.45	3.52	.40
Appropriateness	8.54	< .001	3.74	.34	3.33	.35

The perceived effectiveness and appropriateness of expressiveness

The second set of hypotheses predicted that by comparison to North Americans, Chinese would rate expressiveness as similarly effective and less appropriate. The result of *t*-test showed no statistically significant difference between the cultural groups of their ratings of either effectiveness ($t [213] = .41, p = .69$) or appropriateness ($t [213] = -1.02, p = .31$) of expressive behaviors. Mean values on the effectiveness of expressive behaviors rated by North Americans ($M = 3.83$) and Chinese ($M = 3.79$) were similar. Mean values on the appropriateness of expressive behaviors rated by North Americans ($M = 3.48$) and Chinese ($M = 3.55$) were similar as well (see Table 3). The hypotheses were partly supported.

TABLE 3.

Means, Standard Deviation, and *t*-scores of Perceived Effectiveness and Appropriateness of Expressive Behaviors

			North Americans		Chinese	
	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Effectiveness	.41	.69	3.83	.56	3.79	.56
Appropriateness	1.02	.31	3.48	.50	3.55	.55

Correlation of effectiveness and liking, and appropriateness and liking

The third set of hypotheses predicted that there would be a weaker association between perceived effectiveness of a person's behavior and liking for that person among

Chinese than among North Americans; and that there would be a stronger association between perceived appropriateness of a person's behavior and liking for that person among Chinese than among North Americans.

To test these hypotheses, items for expressiveness and assertiveness were combined into measures of effectiveness, appropriateness, and liking. The correlations were compared using Fisher's r to z transformation. Table 4 reports the results of these calculations. The correlation between effectiveness and liking was .58 for North Americans ($p < .001$, $N = 111$) and .61 for Chinese ($p < .001$, $N = 101$). These correlations were not significantly different ($z = .33$, $p = .38$). The correlation between appropriateness and liking was .72 for North Americans ($p < .001$, $N = 112$) and .67 for Chinese ($p < .001$, $N = 101$). These correlations were not significantly different ($z = .70$, $p = .23$) as well. The hypotheses were not supported.

TABLE 4.

Comparison of the Correlation of Effectiveness and Liking, and Appropriateness and Liking

	Liking					
	North Americans				Chinese	
	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>N</i>
Effectiveness and liking	.33	.38	.58**	111	.61**	101
Appropriateness and liking	.70	.23	.72**	112	.67**	101

** $p < .01$

Discussion

This study is conducted to test if, and how North Americans and Chinese differ in their perceptions of communication competence. Theoretical observations on this subject (e.g. Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Yum, 1988) suggested that these two cultural groups valued some communication behaviors differently. In empirical research however, researchers (e.g. Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; Hwang, Chase, & Kelly, 1980; Zhong, 1998) reported no significant difference among North Americans and Chinese of their perceptions of communication competence. One explanation was that some characteristics of interpersonal competence unique to the Chinese were not attended to in the instrument (Hwang et al., 1980). The second explanation was that the Chinese subjects had lived in the U.S. for quite a few years (Zhong, 1998) and might have adopted some American standards in evaluating communication behaviors. In addition, I argued that the lack of direct translation of *competence* in Chinese language made the comparison of perceptions of competence between these two cultural groups problematic. In the present study, I tried to overcome these limitations by choosing two communication behaviors, namely assertiveness and expressiveness, which had been theoretically identified as perceived differently by these two cultural groups; by recruiting Chinese subjects lived in Mainland China; and by providing detailed translation of *competence* to Chinese participants. Overall, the results suggested that North Americans and Chinese did perceive the competency of assertiveness differently. Additionally, the findings brought into question whether the two cultural groups differentiated effectiveness and appropriateness. This section provides an explanation of

the results, implications drawn from the results, limitations of this study, and suggestions for future research.

One of the two skills tested in this study is assertiveness. The results showed that North Americans and Chinese did perceive the competency of assertiveness differently. In specific, North Americans rated assertive behaviors as significantly more effective and more appropriate than did Chinese. Additionally, North Americans liked the person who showed assertive behaviors better. The findings are consistent with theoretical observations. Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) state that while North Americans value speaking assertively as a sign of strength, Chinese has different interpretation of the same communication behavior. Chinese often consider assertiveness as “marks of arrogance and presumptions as well as of complacency and inconsideration” (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998, p. 77). This interpretation stems from the Confucian idea in traditional Chinese culture. Confucianism advocates maintaining harmonious relationships and meeting other’s needs, wishes, and expectations (Gao, 1998; Lustig & Koester, 2003; Yum, 1988). Assertive behavior is the skill of expressing of one’s own feelings or wants “when such expression risks loss of reinforcement or even punishment” (as cited by Lorr & More, 1980, p.127). Thus, assertiveness is not as desirable in Chinese culture as it is in American culture.

Under the same cultural influence, the Chinese were predicted to value expressiveness differently from North Americans. Yum (1988) assert that while North Americans highly value the effectiveness of speakers by advocating debate and public speaking trainings, Chinese emphasize the receiver (listener’s) sensitivity. Accordingly, I

predicted that Chinese rated expressiveness as less appropriate and less likable when compared to North Americans. Surprisingly, the results in the present study indicated that there was no significant difference in the rating of expressiveness among North Americans and Chinese. A possible explanation for the result is that the Chinese, as well as North Americans, value expressiveness, as long as it does not hurt others. Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) state that the reason the Chinese are often “reminded to be discreet in their everyday speech” (p. 83) is that they are afraid of the risks of hurting others with divergent opinion and improperly used words. In the present study, the subjects were asked to evaluate expressive behaviors, without knowing the consequences of these behaviors. Future research may probe into this question by comparing the ratings of expressive behaviors accompanied with different consequences, such as agreement, disagreement, empathy, and argument etc.

An assumption underlying the three hypotheses in this study is that Chinese differentiate effectiveness and appropriateness, and like the person who showed appropriate behaviors better. This assumption is based on Gao (1998) and Yum’s (1988) argument that for Chinese, maintaining proper relationships is more important than getting things done. Further more, Bond, Leung, and Wan (1982) found that Chinese respondents liked the self-effacing person better, even though the same person was deemed as less competent. However, the results in the present study suggested that similar to North Americans, Chinese did not rate the effectiveness and appropriateness of the same behaviors very differently. Additionally, the correlation between appropriateness and liking was not stronger than that of effectiveness and liking.

One possible explanation for these results is that the subtle difference of effectiveness and appropriateness were not detected. In competence research, effectiveness and appropriateness are distinct yet mutually desirable dimensions (Canary & Spitzberg, 1989). A person is more competent when he/she is perceived to be more effective and appropriate. People usually consider these two dimensions together although it is possible to obtain one at the cost of the other. For instance, one can achieve his/her goal effectively with inappropriate communication behaviors (e.g. cheating, threatening), and vice versa. In the present study, the participants were asked to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of communication behaviors at the same time. It was possible that the participants did not take the time to consider the subtle differences adequately. On this regard, interview questions in addition to questionnaire method may help to separate these two dimensions and to probe the differences in more depth.

Another possible explanation is that the traditional Chinese values are not as influential on the subjects of this study, the college students, as we predicted it to be. Yum (1988) and Gao's (1998) theoretical observations of Chinese communication behaviors are based on the tradition of Confucianism, which emerged 2,500 years ago. How influential are those traditions on this generation of Chinese? The study of Zhang, Harwood, and Hummert (2005) suggest that there are significant generation differences among the Chinese subjects. In their study of perceived competence of conflict strategies, Zhang et al. (2004) found that consistent with Chinese traditional culture, older Chinese participants preferred accommodating style; but inconsistent with Chinese traditional culture, younger Chinese participants either preferred problem solving style, or rated

problem solving style and accommodating style equally. Thus, it is possible that with the rapid economic and social changes in China, young people have more opportunities to encounter western ideas. As a result, their perceptions of competence are different from the older generations but similar to the North Americans. The generational difference among Chinese participants needs to be further tested and proved in future research.

Overall, North American and Chinese participants' perceptions of communication competence both supported and challenged the hypotheses drawn from the literature. The results provided us with several implications regarding the perception of communication competence among North Americans and Chinese, as well as implications regarding intercultural interactions.

The first implication is that different cultural groups may perceive the competency of some communicative skills differently. In this study, North American perceived assertive behaviors as much more competent than did Chinese. This finding supported the argument of ICC researchers, which was mentioned earlier in this paper, that based on research conducted in the specific community of the United States, with typically middle-class, college educated Euro-American sample, IPC research may contain a "Western perspective" and be limited in generalizability to other cultures (Martin, 1993; Miyahara, 1998; Yum, 1988). Theoretically, when compared to North Americans, the Chinese put more emphasis on harmony in relationships and the importance of meeting others' needs, wishes, and expectation (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). The value system affected people's communication behaviors, and specifically in this study, perception of communication competence. Thus, the "Western perspective" of communication

competence may not be generalizable to the Chinese. As for which kind of value system and communication pattern is more desirable, Yum (1988) commented that in the pursuit of individualism, North Americans lack commitment to larger entities such as the community, civic groups, and other organizations. On the other hand, a culture that emphasizes Confucianism (for instance, Chinese culture) may lose individual initiative and innovation (Yum, 1988). Yum's comments suggest that neither one is ideal or perfect. Thus, evaluating communication behaviors in intercultural context with standards/model developed in a single culture can be biased and inaccurate.

Second, while admitting the difference of perceptions of communication competence among North Americans and Chinese, we must note that their perceptions were not as discrepant as we predicted. In the present study, although Chinese rated assertiveness as less competent, the mean scores provided by Chinese participants are still on the positive direction (over 3 on a 5-point likert scale), suggesting a positive evaluation of assertiveness. Hence, even though Chinese perceived assertiveness as less competent when compared to North Americans, they still perceived assertiveness as positive. These results questioned the accuracy of Gao and Ting-Toomey's (1998) observation that Chinese deem speaking definitely and forcefully as a mark of arrogance and inconsideration. Thus, when comparing perceptions of communication competence among North American and Chinese, and perhaps among other cultural groups as well, we need to be cautious of overemphasizing the cultural differences. Understanding this issue clearly is especially important for practitioners. While informing sojourners about the different perceptions of cultural group members, it is important to make it clear

whether the other cultural group consider certain communication skills as differently competent or totally opposite.

Third, this study provides some implications for intercultural interactions overall. As was mentioned earlier in this paper, we are having increased interactions with people from different cultures. To help us communicate competently in intercultural interactions, many ICC researchers examine the differences of perception of communication competence among different cultural groups (e.g. Collier, 1988; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989; Martin, Hecht, & Larkey, 1994; Yum, 1988). While harvesting the rich knowledge of cultural differences, we must not forget an important factor of competence--context. Spitzberg and Brunner (1991) asserted that competence is contingent upon the context in which the communication occurs. Among other situational factors (mood, relationship, setting), people's generation, intercultural experience, education, gender etc. may affect their perceptions of competence. Thus, in intercultural training, we must avoid polarizing cultures and overemphasizing cultural differences, which may not hold true when the communication occurs in different contexts. Instead, mindfulness can be a good approach in intercultural training. Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) described mindfulness as being open to novel or unfamiliar behavior; and being able to view the unfamiliar behavior from a nonjudgmental perspective. Being mindful, the communicator will be more likely to communicate competently with people of different cultures, and in different contexts,

This study is limited in the generability to other age groups. The participants in this study are college students. The mean age was 21.51 ($SD = 5.20$) for North Americans

and 20.05 ($SD = 1.24$) for Chinese. In their study of perceived competence of conflict strategies, Zhang et al. (2005) found significant generation differences among Chinese participants. Future research should consider recruiting participants from different age groups and compare the generation differences. It is also noticeable that participants of the two cultural groups were students recruited from middle-sized, in-land cities. Samples from metropolitan cities in which people (for instance, business people) have more opportunity to interact with other cultures may yield different results.

Another limitation is the low reliability of the expressive items. The reliability coefficient of the expressiveness measure in the original study was reported as $\alpha = .80$ (Macklin & Rossiter, 1976). In this present study however, the reliability coefficient was $\alpha = .47$ for effectiveness, $\alpha = .42$ for appropriateness, and $\alpha = .52$ for liking. For future research testing the perception of expressiveness, researcher may consider adopting multiple expressiveness measures to obtain higher reliability.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to test if, and how North Americans and Chinese differ in their perceptions of communication competence. The results supported the prediction that these two cultural groups perceived the competency of some communication skills differently. On the other hand, the results indicated that the perceptions of communication competence of the two cultural groups were not as discrepant as we predicted them to be. This raises several important questions—to what extent does traditional Chinese culture affect the communication of this generation of Chinese people? Have the Chinese changed a lot in the rapid economic and social

development while we are still analyzing their communication behaviors based on the tradition of several thousand years ago? In the cultural general competence model as suggested by Martin (1993), to what extent should we address the different perceptions of communication competence among different cultures? To develop the cultural general competence model, these questions must be addressed and answered in future intercultural communication competence research.

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